Bullied!

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Coping with Workplace Bullying

Vanessa M. Gattis

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Abstract

Workplace bullying, the repeated and regular act of harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work over time has been recognized as a serious threat to the health and well-being of employees. This study sought to explore resilience as a coping strategy to help improve the physical and mental health effects of professional women who have or are experiencing workplace bullying. The central research question was, how does perceived resilience, when used as a coping strategy, help with the physical and mental health stressors while helping to improve the overall well-being of professional women who were or have experienced workplace bullying? Using a qualitative methodology with a single-case study design, 10 professional women who have and are still experiencing workplace bullying were commissioned to participate. To increase the validity of the results, four data techniques were employed: open-ended interviews, researcher notes with observations, and two surveys-the Resilience at Work (R@W) Scale, and the SF12v2 Health Survey. Four major themes emerged: Negative Experiences, Consequences of Bullying, Impact on Health, and Support Systems. It was discovered that the majority of the participants believed that they were targeted at their workplace because of their race, followed by their gender, and age. The women shared that the negative experiences and consequences of bullying can serve as indicators that workplace bullying is evident and that it can affect their health negatively. Additionally, the participants reported that various support systems and networks greatly increased their resilience at work.

Keywords: workplace bullying, resilience, coping strategies, physical & mental health

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my three heartthrobs: Thomas, William, and TJ Gattis. Throughout this entire program, the three of you have been my motivation and the reason I continued what I started and finished the journey.

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This is the day the LORD has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it! Psalm 118:24.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Study

Introduction

One of the growing problems in the American workforce is workplace bullying (Gholipour, Sanjari, Bod, & Kozekanan, 2011). Workplace bullying is the repeated and regular act of harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work over a period of time and has been recognized as a serious threat to the health and well-being of employees (Høgh, Mikkelsen, & Hansen, 2011). The negative behavior can manifest itself in multiple ways, including direct (physical and verbal), indirect (psychological and relational), work-related (withholding information), person-related (socially excluding), and physical intimidation (finger pointing) (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009). According to Keashly and Harvey (2006), a significant number of workers have persistently been exposed to abusive behavior in the workplace. In fact, research indicated that in both Europe and North America, that 10% to 15% of the workforce have been exposed to workplace bullying (Keashly & Jagatic, 2011; Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011). A survey conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI, 2014) on U.S. workers estimated that approximately 27% of U.S. workers have experienced some level of workplace bullying. When put into a numerical perspective, the equivalent of 37 million American workers have been subjected to *abusive behavior* in the workplace. Further, the survey not only revealed the number of workers who were abused, but it also highlighted those workers who have witnessed the bullying behavior. This accounted for 65.6 million workers, equating to a population of 15 states in Middle America to the Gulf of Mexico (see Figure 1).

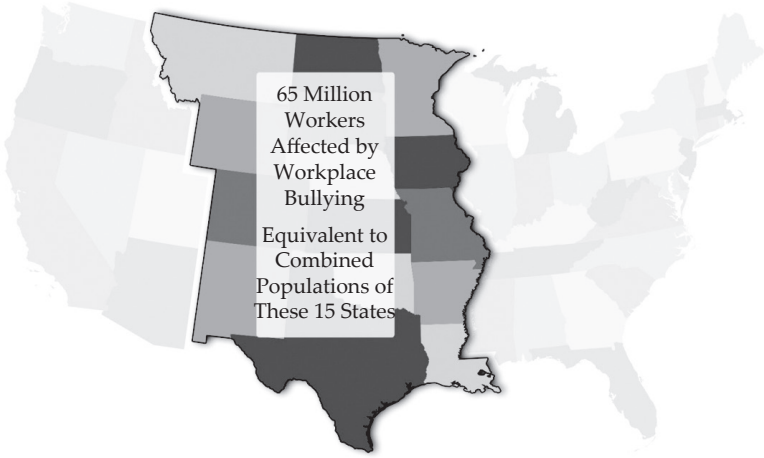

Figure 1. Summation of U.S. workers affected (65.6 million), both directly and those who have witnessed bullying, is the equivalent of the population of 15 states by the Workplace Bullying Institute (2014). U.S. workplace bullying survey: January 2014.

Since it was first introduced as a workforce phenomenon in the 1970s, workplace bullying has emerged as a complex issue that is often misunderstood (Olweus, 1978). With growing interest, research scholars, for over the past 20 years, have sought to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon, while attempting to find strategies to combat the issue (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2012). From an organizational perspective, workplace bullying can pose a huge problem for both the organization and the employees, as the negative effects can significantly diminish the overall well-being (Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011) and work performance of employee morale, productivity (MacIntosh, 2012), and turnover, while incurring significant financial loss and legal cost to the organization (Appelbaum, Semerjian, & Mohan, 2012; Glambek, Matthiesen, Hetland, & Einarsen, 2014; McTernan, Dollard, & LaMontagne, 2013; Wilson, Diedrich, Phelps, & Choi, 2011). For workers, workplace bullying can lead to physical and mental stresses that can diminish the effectiveness of the employees. For women, in particular, workplace bullying occurs more frequently compared to men (Lewis, 2006), and is one of the most troublesome issues that they face in the workplace (Gholipour et al., 2011).

The literature clearly lacks sufficient studies that have explored the physical and mental health effects of workplace bullying in professional women (Gholipour et al., 2011; Lian & Tam, 2014). Resilience, when used as a coping strategy, may help improve the overall well-being of professional women who have or are experiencing workplace bullying (Lian & Tam, 2014; Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a; NasrEsfahani & Shahbazi, 2014; Sauer, 2013). Researchers argued that greater understanding is needed to fully grasp the extent and magnitude of workplace bullying; while the current research suggested that using resilience may help protect workers from the negative health effects of those who are or have experienced workplace bullying (Lian & Tam, 2014; Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a; NasrEsfahani & Shahbazi, 2014; Sauer, 2013). This study intended to close the gap by using perceived resilience as a coping strategy to help facilitate increased well-being of professional women within an organizational environment who are dealing with the phenomenon workplace bullying.

This chapter contains a broad overview of the study. The background of the study, problem statement, purpose, and the research questions are presented. Additionally, how this study advanced scientific knowledge and an explanation of the significance of the study follows. Further, for the research section of this study, the rationale for the methodology, as well as the research design are presented. Last, this chapter also provides the definition of terms that are used, the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of this study and concludes with a summary detailing the organization of the study.

Background of the Study

For the past 20 years, workplace bullying developed into an international phenomenon and drew much needed attention throughout the literature (Leymann, 1990; Samnani & Singh, 2012). In 1990, Leymann studied bullying behaviors on the playground and drew similar conclusions of the negative behaviors experienced in the workplace. Since then, a number of researchers have investigated workplace bullying and have created their own definition of the phenomenon (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Monks et al., 2009). Despite the various

definitions of workplace bullying, the common denominator was that the targeted individual must have been exposed to the negative behavior frequently and over a period of time, typically over a 6-month period (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Rayner & Cooper, 2006; Rayner & Keashly, 2005).

Workplace bullying behaviors can range from harassment, offending or socially excluding individuals in the workplace (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012), to an individual's professional status being undermined (Einarsen et al., 2009; Escartin, Rodriquez-Carballeira, Zapf, Porrúa, & Martin-Peña, 2009). The behavior can negatively affect a person's ability to accomplish his or her job (Leo, Reid, Geldenhuys, & Gobind, 2014). Gardner et al. (2013) determined that the adverse effects of workplace bullying could result in anxiety, stress, burnout, and depression. Women are more susceptible to workplace bullying resulting in them either leaving their jobs or it directly and/or indirectly causing significant challenges to their physical and mental health (MacIntosh, 2012). Considering the limited strategies and/or tools available to combat this organizational issue, there is still a gap in the literature that considered effective resources to help professional women cope and deal with the phenomenon. In fact, throughout the literature, resilience was hardly mentioned as an available tool to help cope with workplace bullying (Lian & Tam, 2014; Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a; NasrEsfahani & Shahbazi, 2014; Sauer, 2013).

Workplace bullying jeopardizes the overall health and well-being of individuals, and if not dealt with properly, not only is an individual's health diminished, but his or her work productivity decreases, which can incur significant recruiting and retention costs to organizations (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2002; MacIntosh, 2012; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Sloan, Matyok, & Schmitz, 2010; Tehrani, 2004). Building on the personal resilience of professional women is essential to helping them cope with the negative effects of workplace bullying (Mealer, Jones, & Moss, 2012; Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). When used as a coping strategy, resilience literature suggested that it could be seen as "synonymous with reduced vulnerability" (Hofer, 2006, p. 261). Additionally, resilience has also been amplified as a significant contributor to improved health, cognitive processes, and coping skills (Lian & Tam, 2014; van Heugten, 2013). Recent studies posited that using resilience as a personal resource might help protect

workers from the negative health effects, because of those who were or have experienced workplace bullying (Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a; Sauer, 2013).

Problem Statement

It was not known how the influence of resilience, when used as coping strategy, can help professional women overcome the physical and mental health stressors associated with workplace bullying. Gardner et al. (2013) posited that the adverse effects of workplace bullying could result in anxiety, stress, burnout, and depression. Conversely, research has shown that resilience has the ability to empower people to overcome physical and mental stressors, become more confident, and show a stronger sense of self as employees in the workplace (Sloan et al., 2010; van Heugten, 2010). Professional women, who are resilient when dealing with negative workplace behaviors, may gain a better understanding of how the influence of resilience on their physical and mental health can increase their overall well-being and work performance within an organization.

Workplace bullying literature supported the fact that women were bullied at higher rates and more often compared to men (WBI, 2014). According to a statistical survey conducted by the WBI (2014), women made up 60% of the bullied targets. Additionally, of the people who are targeted, 69% of the perpetrators are men. The research showed that women who were targeted, because of workplace bullying, experienced increased health consequences, which resulted in a significant amount of time away from the workplace (Berthelsen, Skogstad, Lau, & Einarsen, 2011). Lewis (2006) posited that women were more vulnerable to bullying behavior because they were considered the *weaker sex*, and it was recognized in organizations as acceptable behavior.

This research study had the ability to purport increased personal resilience levels and decreased physical and mental health levels of professional women, who were or have experienced workplace bullying as related to her personal experiences. This research was vital and contributed to solving the problem by providing an understanding on how perceived resilience could be used as a strategy to help professional

women cope with the physical and mental health stressors associated with workplace bullying. This study examined the limited resources available to help improve their overall well-being, as well as provided a clear, alternative method to professional women to help reduce their intent to leave the workforce, thereby decreasing worker turnover.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how the influence of resilience, when used as a coping strategy, could help professional women overcome the physical and mental health stressors associated with workplace bullying, while helping to improve their overall well-being. This study was comprised of 10 professional women within the National Capital Region of Washington, DC, who were or have experienced workplace bullying. Workplace bullying is defined as an act in which "a person is repeatedly subjected to negative acts" (Gardner et al., 2013, p. 383); with the common denominator that the targeted individual must have been exposed to the negative behavior frequently and over time, typically over 6 months (Einarsen et al., 2011; Rayner & Cooper, 2006; Rayner & Keashly, 2005).

Jacobs and Schain (2009) posited that the role of the woman in the employment sector changed in the 21st century. The researchers defined a professional woman as "one who has integrated into the workforce and who work in career fields that have been previously dominated by their male counterparts" (Jacobs & Schain, 2009, p. 99). The researchers stated that women made up 47% of the total labor force and anticipated that women would continue to participate in the business environment for another 30 plus years. Women continue to encounter difficulties in the workforce, resulting in their work performance, as well as their mental health having a great impact (Garima & Kiran, 2014). Additionally, Lewis (2006) argued that women who experienced bullying in the workplace greatly affected their physical and mental health, resulting in well-documented psychological effects consistent with stress (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001), anxiety (Leymann, 1990; Niedl, 1996), post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994; Groeblinghoff & Becker, 1996; Leymann & Gustaffson, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). The literature clearly lacked sufficient

methods that helped professional women cope with the effects of the phenomenon workplace bullying.

Since it was not known whether resilience, when used as a coping strategy, could aid professional women by improving their physical and mental health and their overall well-being associated with workplace bullying, this descriptive, single-case study was designed to explore the phenomenon. The target population for this study was 10 professional women who work within the National Capital Region of Washington, DC. A sample size of 10 professional women was sufficient for conducting this qualitative case study (Yin, 2013). To account for attrition, purposive sampling was used to gather 20 eligible professional women participants as opposed to 10. The researcher was also prepared to utilize snowball sampling as a back-up plan should she had failed to obtain the sample size of eligible professional women participants. Noy (2008) posited that snowball sampling in qualitative research was one of the most widely used methods of sampling, as it provided a "fallback alternative" (p. 5) for when a researcher's ability to access new contacts was not feasible or "dried up" (p. 5).

Research Questions

NasrEsfahani and Shahbazi (2014) argued that greater understanding was needed to fully grasp the extent and magnitude of workplace bullying; while the current research suggested that using resilience might help protect workers from the negative health effects of those who were or have experienced workplace bullying (Maidaniuc-Chirilă, 2015a; Sauer, 2013). The central focus of this study was to describe the experiences of 10 professional women who were or have experienced workplace bullying and the role of resilience as a coping strategy for their overall well-being. The design for this study, of which the data were triangulated through the use of open-ended interviews, the SF12v2, Your Health and Well-Being Survey (Maruish, 2012), the Resilience at Work (R@W) Scale (McEwen & Winwood, 2011), and researcher notes with observations, offered the means to answer the following major research question: How does perceived resilience, when used as a coping strategy, help with the physical and mental health stressors while helping to improve the overall well-being of professional women who were or